

The Scripture That Reminds Us of God's Incredible Generosity

John 3:16 is probably one of the most oft-quoted verses in the Bible: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

We often use it in conversations with those who are lost in order to point the way to salvation. But at this time of year, it takes on particular significance even to those who are not lost, for it is a reminder that our tradition of giving to others is a reflection of God's generosity toward us. We give because He gave.

However, there's more to it than that. If we want our giving to truly imitate that of the Father, we must have the same motivation He did: "For God so loved the world ..." We can never approximate the magnitude of that gift, certainly, but we can give—whatever we give—from a heart overflowing with His love.

The paramount nature of love struck me afresh some time ago when the Holy Spirit arrested me during a church service with the question, "If you knew in advance that today was going to be your last day on Earth, how would you spend it?" Immediately my thoughts went to my family. I knew I would want to spend whatever time I had left with them, making sure they know how important they are to me and how much I love them.

Not long afterward, the Lord asked me a similar question: "If the next time you see each person in your life turned out to be the last encounter you have with that person, what is the impression you would want to leave? How would you want him or her to remember you?"

Several scenarios came to mind. If I walked out the door of my home in the morning and didn't return at the end of the day, what would I want my family to remember as my last words and gestures? If I ran into someone in the hall or the break room at work and then never saw that person again, what kind of memory would I want them to retain? In each last encounter, what would I want to be sure to say to my family, friends or business associates—or even someone I might meet on the street?

These questions have continued to roll around in my spirit from the moment the Lord first posed them to me. They are a constant reminder that, like the man in the parable who planned to build bigger barns to store all the grain he was amassing (see Luke 12:16-21), none of us knows how much time is allotted to us, and we have to make the most of each moment God gives us to fulfill the two commandments Jesus said were most important—loving God and loving people. Nothing else matters. In fact, Paul says it makes no difference what we give; if we don't have love, "it profits [us] nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3).

Think about the implications of this truth. No matter how much you give—even if you "give all [your] goods to feed the poor," Paul declares, "or give [your] body to be burned," it will have no eternal benefit (v. 3). Only what you do out of love will count.

Maybe now is the time, as you are going down your list of gift recipients, to ask yourself: *What is the motive behind my gift giving? Is it simply an obligation? Am I trying to impress someone or gain favor? Do I expect something in return? Or am I sincerely trying to express the love of God to another person?*

If your motive isn't love, pray for a change of heart. If it is, take time to tell the person so. Write a quick note or say it verbally when you deliver the gift. That is bound to mean

more to him or her than what's inside the package. And it's the only thing either one of you can take with you into eternity. {eoa}

Prayer Power for the Week of December 16, 2016

Thank God for His wondrous love, expressed through the giving of His Son, Jesus. Pray for open hearts all over the world to receive this gift of love. Ask the Lord to give you opportunities to share His love and provision with those who have lost homes, jobs and loved ones this year. Continue to pray for the persecuted church and the protection of Israel along with our troops and their families. As you pray for our own nation, ask God to protect and direct our president and our president-elect, mend the divisions within our country, bring unity among those holding to biblical principles in our legislature and establish righteousness in our judicial system (1 John 4:7-21; Luke 2:8-14).